

A *Forum* Retrospective: 60 Years of English Language Teaching

by JAMILA BARTON

As *English Teaching Forum* celebrates 60 years of publication, we are taking this opportunity to reflect on the English language teaching (ELT) methods and classroom practices the journal's authors have been presenting and discussing over the decades. A review of past *Forum* articles reveals an ongoing conversation about key debates in the international ELT community. Because *Forum* is first and foremost a journal for practitioners, its authors have provided many practical suggestions for teaching, based on various ELT traditions and offering answers to these timeless questions:

- What is the purpose of language learning?
- How do learners become proficient in a foreign language?
- What methods and techniques should language teachers use?

What follows is a decade-by-decade review of some of the main trends that *Forum* authors have written about. Trends rarely fit neatly into decade-long segments, though, and this review is an attempt to identify when ELT ideas began to take hold, based on articles

published in *Forum*; authors have continued to explore many of these trends in the decades that followed. The review is by no means exhaustive, but it covers a number of the significant issues that have arisen (and, in some cases, fallen) over the last six decades.

THE FIRST DECADE (1962–1971)

During the 1960s, when *Forum* began publication, ELT practitioners had already moved away from a focus on grammar and translation as a means for scholarly study. Instead, many educators believed that the main goal for learning a language was to focus on speaking and listening. As a result, during this time, *Forum* authors gave practical suggestions for using the audiolingual method. The method, as described by Richards and Rodgers (2014), encourages the use of aural (listening) and oral (speaking) models and practice in the classroom. In audiolingualism, lessons are organized linguistically from simple to increasingly complex patterns. One *Forum* author, Shirley Stryker, in a series on “Applied Linguistics: Principles and Techniques” (1966), described rules and patterns for different areas of English linguistics and provided sample drills for each pattern.

NOTE

This is the second of four articles commemorating the 60th anniversary of *English Teaching Forum*. Each 2022 issue will feature one of the articles.

Additionally, beliefs about language learning were heavily influenced by behaviorism (Skinner 1957), and many *Forum* authors, like Dan Desberg, in “Automacity: Language Learning Goal” (1963), proposed that the way to achieve proficiency was to model language patterns for students and help them form habits through practices and drills that reinforced stimulus–response relationships. Herschel J. Frey, in “Audiolingual Teaching and the Pattern Drill” (1971), gave step-by-step instructions for creating appropriate dialogues and drills to teach language learners. He suggested using dialogues to provide situational cultural information for language structures and using drills to help learners memorize the structures.

Another trend centered on the use of technology. Advances in technology, which at the time meant primarily radio and television, sparked debates in *Forum* about the role of the classroom and the role of audiovisual media in learning languages. Desberg, in his 1963 article mentioned

above, and Charles Kreidler, in “The Language Laboratory and the Language Classroom” (1964), encouraged the use of electronic audiovisual aids in language labs to give learners more input and practice, but these authors also reinforced the need for a teacher to provide error correction, interaction, and authentic models.

THE SECOND DECADE (1972–1981)

This decade is characterized by a movement away from the audiolingual method and drills toward communicative language teaching (CLT). Authors like Janet Ross, in “Transformationalists and ESL Teachers Today” (1973), were influenced by Chomsky’s (1965) transformational grammar theory, which suggests that language is innate, rule-governed, and infinitely creative. *Forum* authors, in this decade, began to question the practice of drilling and suggested that communication couldn’t be learned by forming habits. Instead, they proposed that the purpose of language learning is to

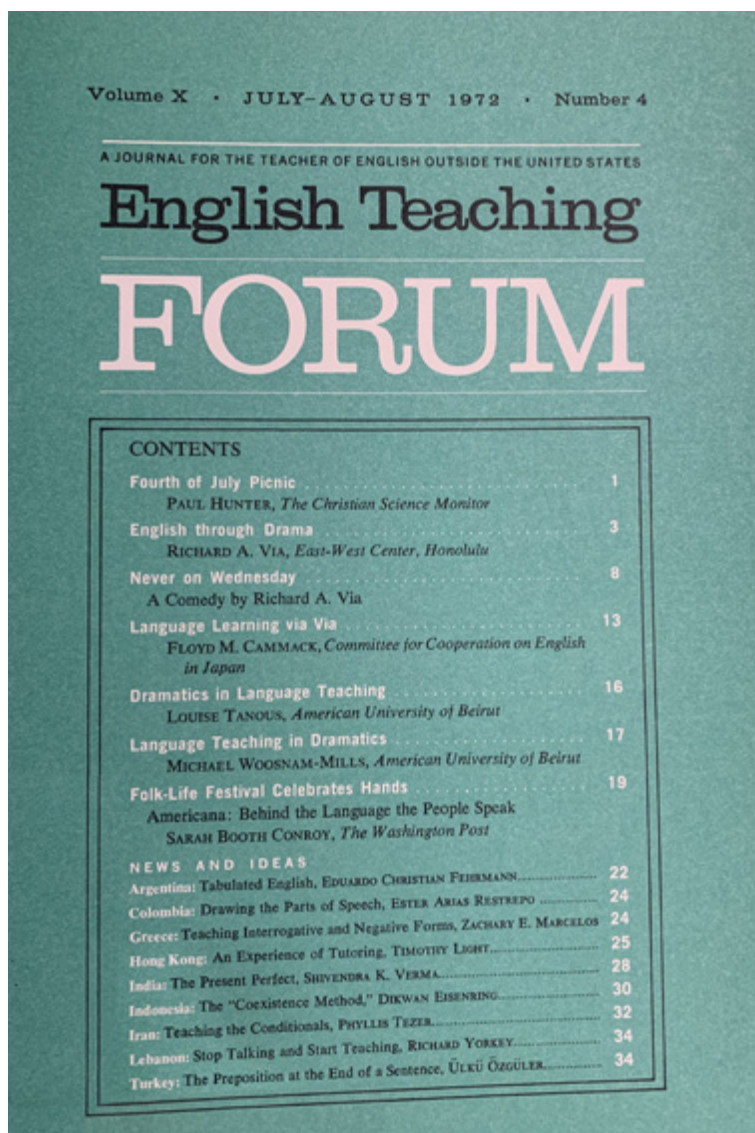


Forum Fact

The *English Teaching Newsletter* was started in 1962 and became *English Teaching Forum* in 1963. The first article in the first issue of *Forum* was “Experimentation in the Language Classroom” by Harlan Lane; it discussed behaviorist methods for language teaching and the importance of action research in the classroom. (Shown here is the complete Table of Contents from Volume 1, Number 1.)

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Over the past six decades, the contents and the design of *Forum* have evolved. In this 1972 issue, the Table of Contents appeared on the front cover.

communicate and argued that communication is spontaneous and creative. Sandra Savignon, in "Teaching for Communication" (1978), described communicative competence as "the ability to function in a communicative setting"; she recommended using real language activities with students and avoiding error correction so that students would feel free to express themselves. During this decade, several *Forum* articles, like Austin Sanders' "Activities for Communication Practice" (1980), discussed ways to encourage communication in the classroom by designing activities that contained an information gap so

that learners would have to communicate with each other to share information and close the gap.

In another trend, authors such as Mary Finocchiaro, in "M-o-t-i-v-a-t-i-o-n in Language Learning" (1976), became interested in how affective factors influenced language learning. Language learners' needs became central, as evidenced by articles like Alan McLean's "Destroying the Teacher: The Need for Learner-Centered Teaching" (1980); practitioners were counseled to be aware of student needs and change their own roles to become guides in the classroom. Other *Forum* authors discussed humanistic language-teaching methods that encouraged learner self-expression and free communication. Examples of articles describing these methods include Paul G. La Forge's "Community Language Learning: An Experiment in Japan" (1977); T. Todd Diemer and Opart Panya's "What We Learned Using the Silent Way" (1980); Stephen Silvers' "The Total Physical Response" (1981); and, later, Lonny Gold's "Suggestopedia: Activating the Student's Reserve Capacities" (1985). Emphasis was placed on the language learner as a whole person, as English language practitioners—like Richard Via, in "English through Drama" (1972); Albert Marckwardt, in "What Literature to Teach: Principles of Selection and Class Treatment" (1981); and Anne Pechou, in "The Magic Carpet: Storytelling in a Humanistic Perspective" (1981)—promoted the use of drama, storytelling, and literature to encourage learner creativity and establish an emotional connection to learning.

THE THIRD DECADE (1982–1991)

In the late 1970s and continuing into the 1980s, *Forum* authors, including Harry Hawkes, in "The Notional Syllabus, Discourse Analysis, and ESP Materials" (1979), and Suzanne Salimbene, in "From Structurally-Based to Functionally-Based Approaches to Language Teaching" (1983), argued for curriculum to be organized according to

the language functions that learners needed to perform instead of following an English linguistic-based (structural) syllabus organized hierarchically from simple to increasingly complex grammar points. The movement to develop curriculum based on what learners wanted or needed to do with language coincided with an increase in English for specific purposes (ESP) courses at vocational centers, colleges, and universities. For example, Louis Trimble, in “A Rhetorical Approach to Reading Scientific and Technical English” (1979), and S. J. Singh and Thomas Chacko, in “The Structure of a Technical Text and Its Pedagogical Implications” (1986), reasoned that because scientific and technical texts have unique linguistic and organizational features, they should be taught in English courses specifically focused on science and technology. In a related trend, authors—such as Anamaria Harvey, in “Designing an ESP Course: A Case Study” (1984); Ananda Sekara, in “An Approach to Reading for Academic Purposes” (1987); and Alain Souillard and Anthony Kerr, in “Problem-Solving Activities for Science and Technology Students” (1990)—discussed methods best suited for teaching English so that learners can participate in specific academic disciplines and industries.

The belief in the importance of CLT and the learner-centered classroom continued, and in the 1980s, *Forum* articles showed that teaching methods based on these principles were becoming increasingly diverse. In particular, there was an increased focus on teaching the receptive skills, listening and reading, as well as academic writing. Influenced by Krashen and Terrell’s (1983) natural approach, *Forum* authors Paul Nation, in “Interaction and Communication in the ESOL Classroom” (1984); Gillian Brown, in “25 years of Teaching Listening Comprehension” (1987); and Aldo Higashi, in “Adapting Krashen’s Second Language Acquisition Theory” (1988), recommended delaying speaking activities and, instead, providing comprehensible input ($i + 1$) through authentic listening-comprehension activities.

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Meanwhile, *Forum* articles on teaching reading and writing began to take on an academic focus because of the rise in academic English as a second language (ESL) programs and intensive English programs (IEPs) at colleges and universities. In “Learning to Read versus Reading to Learn: Resolving the Instructional Paradox” (1983), David E. Eskey discussed the importance of building cognitive “top-down processing” reading skills, such as background knowledge, along with “bottom-up processing” skills, such as word recognition and vocabulary, while Duncan Dixon, in “Teaching Composition to Large Classes” (1986), discussed ways to use the writing process, promote peer editing, and give teacher feedback as a part of teaching second-language academic writing. With so many teaching methods and techniques proposed, English language practitioners



By 2002, color and a new look had arrived. These are the contents of the first issue of the 40th-anniversary year. This issue is available online (at americanenglish.state.gov/forum).

were surely feeling overwhelmed by how to teach. Diane Larsen-Freeman, in “From Unity to Diversity: 25 Years of Language Teaching Methodology” (1987; reprinted in 2012), reflected this concern when she argued not for any one method over another, but for “principled eclecticism”—choosing the appropriate method based on the classroom context.

THE FOURTH DECADE (1992–2001)

In the 1990s, concern for differing needs in different contexts as well as advances in technology led to new trends in methodology. One trend was toward integrating language skills and

contextualizing language instruction. For example, Prema Kumari Dheran’s “Chain Reaction: Transferring a Speaking-Listening Activity to Reading and Writing” (1998) advocated for teaching language skills together for improved communicative competence, while Daniela Sorani and Anna Rita Tamponi’s “A Cognitive Approach to Content-Based Instruction” (1992) and Susan Stempleski’s “Linking the Classroom to the World: The Environment and EFL” (1993) argued that CLT methods provide communicative competence only in everyday English language and recommended contextualizing language instruction by using subject-matter content and themes to give learners a richer language experience.

During this time, many *Forum* authors adapted classroom instruction using Vygotsky’s (1987) sociocultural theory. Claude Sionis, in “Let Them Do Our Job! Towards Autonomy via Peer Teaching and Task-Based Exercises” (1990), and Mary Ann Christison, in “Cooperative Learning in the EFL Classroom” (1990), described ways to incorporate collaborative activities that help learners teach each other and increase learner autonomy and engagement. Discussions of a sociocultural approach continued in more recent decades, as evidenced by Le Pham Hoai Huong’s “The Mediation Role of Language Teachers in Sociocultural Theory” (2003), which described the importance of teacher-guided scaffolded activities, learner interaction, and joint meaning-making in language learning.

Also in the 1990s, advances in technology made computers more accessible to teachers and opened new avenues for ELT, beyond the language laboratory of the 1960s and 1970s and the videocassette recorder (VCR) of the 1980s. Simona Mirescu, in “Computer Assisted Instruction in Language Teaching” (1997), and Benecio Galavis, in “Computers and the EFL Class: Their Advantages and a Possible Outcome, the Autonomous Learner” (1998), discussed the use of computer-assisted language learning (which became

known as CALL) in providing learners with extensive listening and reading practice and increasing their autonomy and engagement.

THE FIFTH DECADE (2002–2011)

The first decade of the 21st century marked a continued trend toward contextualized and project-based teaching, emphasizing what learners need to be able to do with language once they are out of the classroom. Authors such as Karen Englander, in “Real Life Problem Solving: A Collaborative Learning Activity” (2002), and Gina Iberri-Shea, in “Using Public Speaking Tasks in English Language Teaching” (2009), proposed activities rooted in task-based language teaching (TBLT) methodology. An early proponent of TBLT, Ken Hyland, in “Language-Learning Simulations: A Practical Guide” (1993), had defined a task as “a problem-driven activity that occurs in a realistic setting” that students might need to complete in situations outside the classroom. TBLT is not a departure from CLT because communication remains the purpose of language learning, but TBLT goes beyond CLT in that it considers social tasks learners will need to complete by using language.

In another trend, *Forum* authors interested in ESP used insights gained from discourse analysis and corpus linguistics to teach features of spoken discourse and written genres in specific fields. Diane Millar’s “Promoting Genre Awareness in the EFL Classroom” (2011) discussed ways to raise learner awareness of moves and linguistic features in particular types of writing, while Li-Shih Huang’s “Using Guided, Corpus-Aided Discovery to Generate Active Learning” (2008) proposed ways to use corpora to learn vocabulary and grammar.

Meanwhile, other *Forum* authors began to question assumptions about who “owns” English, in articles like Sandra Lee McKay’s “Western Culture and the Teaching of

English as an International Language” (2004) and Thomas S. C. Farrell and Sonia Martin’s “To Teach Standard English or World Englishes? A Balanced Approach to Instruction” (2009). These voices questioned preferences for native-speaking teachers in English as a foreign language (EFL) contexts and the dominance of inner-circle English-speaking countries like the United States and the United Kingdom over outer-circle English-speaking countries like India and Singapore, based on Kachru’s (1992) Three Concentric Circles Model, and began to recommend a move toward English as an international language (EIL).

THE SIXTH DECADE (2012–2021) AND BEYOND

This last decade has represented an increased focus on online learning, stressing the importance of multimodality and digital literacy in language learning, and the COVID pandemic accelerated that movement. Valerie Sartor, in “Digital Age Pedagogy: Easily Enhance Your Teaching Practice with Technology” (2020), acknowledged that teachers have a plethora of technological content, materials, and tools for English language learning available to them and emphasized the importance of evaluating the appropriateness of sources for classroom use. The digital age is also increasingly changing the way we communicate, and articles like Kathy Brenner’s “Digital Stories: A 21st-Century Communication Tool for the English Language Classroom” (2014) and Jonathan Maiullo’s “Considering Multimodal Materials and Modes of Communication for Authentic Communication in Online Classes” (2022) advocated incorporating multimodal communication in language learning because learners need to be able to create and understand oral and written texts presented in multiple sensory modes (e.g., printed or written text, audio, images) and varying communication channels (e.g., in person and online, synchronous and asynchronous).

Another trend that has become more prominent during this past decade is the movement toward learning language and communicating for cross-cultural understanding, building community, and social change in an increasingly globalized, pluralistic world. For example, Susan Renaud and Elizabeth Tannenbaum, in “Making Connections: Language Activities for Creating Interpersonal Tolerance in the Classroom” (2013), presented communicative activities that teach learners to use language for active listening and conflict resolution, while Kathleen Malu and Bryce Smedley, in “Community-Based English Clubs: English Practice and Social Change Outside the English Classroom” (2016), offered strategies for creating and sustaining English clubs that could engage members in conversations and potential community action. Eleanor Kashmar Wolf and David Gasbarro Tasker’s “‘This American English Class’: A New Model of Cultural Instruction” (2018) discussed the importance of intercultural competence for listening and reading comprehension of authentic texts; they suggested using critical cultural-awareness-raising activities with a popular National Public Radio program, “This American Life.” And in “Using Identity to Introduce ICC Skills in the EFL Classroom” (2020), Xiuqing Wang and Kelly Donovan outlined a lesson in which language learners consider their own identities in order to raise awareness of other cultural identities and how they might affect communication.

Other articles that reflect the growing importance of cross-cultural communication and mutual understanding include Jerry Frank’s “Raising Cultural Awareness in the English Language Classroom” (2013), Ramin Yazdanpanah’s “Exploring and Expressing Culture through Project-Based Learning” (2019), and Ingrid Brita Mathew’s “Finding Heterogeneity in Cultural Homogeneity” (2021).

CONCLUSIONS

How do English language practitioners decide what approach to take in the classroom, and what can practitioners take away from this historical retrospective of *Forum* articles and their concerns? We would like to propose several key takeaways. First, behaviorist theory has largely been vindicated by recent research and practices; language learners need repetition and spaced practice over time to become proficient. Second, learners need a lot of comprehensible input (that is, input they can understand), but most learners also need explicit instruction in vocabulary, grammar, and lexical phrases to build awareness of how language is used. Third, language learners are diverse. They have different needs, interests, and goals, and teachers should not only be aware of these differences, but they should use varying methods to create a classroom environment that fosters engagement, independence (autonomy), and positive feelings towards the language. Fourth, and finally, the primary reason for learning language is to communicate, but the primary reasons to communicate are to share information and complete tasks. Learners will be more motivated and engaged when participating in classroom activities that simulate real-world tasks that they need to be able to do with English.

Clearly, the types of tasks learners need to do and the ways that people communicate have changed over the past 60 years, and they will continue to change in the future. This brief retrospective shows just some of the ways that language teachers have adapted to changes occurring both inside and outside the classroom. Overall, the diversity of the content of *Forum* articles reflects the diversity of the English language teaching world, where teachers work with learners in a wide range of contexts toward an ever-expanding range of goals.

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